

UNDER GOD'S JUDGMENT

2 Samuel 1:1-16

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David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the LORD and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword (2 Sam. 1:11-12).

Death will often exert a profound influence on those who come near it. Consider the experience of young Adoniram Judson, on a night in 1808. Lodging in an inn, he learned that next door was a man who was struggling in the throes of death.

Listening the dreadful sounds next door, Judson wrestled with his thoughts. A brilliant student at Providence College, Judson had become enthralled with the company of students who had embraced the Enlightenment ideas coming from Europe, particularly a witty upperclassman, Jacob Eames, who had persuaded him to adopt deism and its idea of an absent God. On his twentieth birthday, Judson broke his parents heart with the news that he had abandoned the Christian faith of his youth and was moving to New York city to pursue a life of pleasure working in the theater.

It was during this time that Judson sojourned in the inn, with the dying man next door. Hearing the terrible distress, he wondered if the man was prepared to die. Moans would pass through the walls and he could hear the man's restless struggling. What would his "freethinking" friend Eames say to dismiss his anxiety and remove his concerns about eternity? Was the man next door a Christian? Or was he, like Judson, one who had despised the prayers of his godly mother and rejected the gospel for a sophisticated worldly creed? Before long, he began to wonder about his own fate in death, desperately

trying to counter these “superstitious illusions” with the clever replies of the deist Eames.

Finally, the light of dawn entered Judson’s chamber and the distressing sounds from next door came to an end. Gathering his things, he was prepared to put the ridiculous ordeal behind him. On the way out, however, he passed the innkeeper and asked about the man next door. “He is gone, poor fellow!” was the reply. “The doctor said he would probably not survive the night.” “Do you know who he was?” Judson asked. “Oh yes. Young man from the college in Providence,” came the reply. “Name was Eames, Jacob Eames.”¹ John Piper provides the postscript to this remarkable providence:

Judson could hardly move. He stayed there for hours pondering the death of his unbelieving friend. If Eames were right, then this was a meaningless event. But Judson could not believe it. “That hell should open in that country inn and snatch Jacob Eames, his dearest friend and guide, from the next bed – this could not, simply could not, be pure coincidence.”²

Adoniram Judson, who later became one of the greatest of all Baptist missionaries, was not immediately converted. Months of struggle were to follow as he wrestled with that remarkable night and his own sinful heart. But one thing is sure – the presence of death had broken into the path of his life and changed him forever.

A REPORT FROM THE BATTLE

As we begin to study 2 Samuel, we encounter in David another man whose life was dramatically changed by news of a death. 2 Samuel picks up the story directly where 1 Samuel left it off, which is to be expected since originally, until the time of its translation into Greek, Samuel was a single book in the Bible. 1 Samuel 29 tells of David’s armed band of fugitives marching in the Philistine host as it advanced towards its invasion of Israel and of how David was providentially delivered from the battle that would take place in the north. Chapter 30 tells of his return to his southern base at Ziklag, to find that Amalekite raiders had made off with their

¹ Samuel Fisk, *More Fascinating Conversion Stories* (Grand Rapids: Kregel 1994), 65-67.

² John Piper, *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2009), 91.

wives, children, and property. David and his men pursued and defeated these raiders and returned to Ziklag. The final chapter of 1 Samuel then relates the result of the battle between King Saul and the Israelites against the massed Philistine host. When 2 Samuel begins, the reader knows what David does not yet know: Saul was defeated and killed and the Israelites were scattered in defeat.

2 Samuel 1:2 picks up the story on the third day since David's victory over the Amalekites who had raided his base. David and his force had returned to Ziklag, where David was met by an unexpected messenger: "On the third day, behold, a man came from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and dirt on his head" (2 Sam. 1:2). David must have been eagerly awaiting news from the great battle to the north. The approach of a travel-worn man in the traditional garb of lament and grieving – torn clothes and dirt on his head – would have braced David for bad news. After the man had fallen before him and paid homage, David asked the question to which he already must have guessed the answer: "Where do you come from?" The man answered, "I have escaped from the camp of Israel." David eagerly demanded, "How did it go? Tell me" (2 Sam. 1:3-4).

Given the man's attire, there could only have been one answer. The man replied directly, "The people fled from the battle, and also many of the people have fallen and are dead, and Saul and his son Jonathan are also dead" (2 Sam. 1:4). Knowing the demoralized state of Saul's army and having seen the might of the Philistines first hand, David would not doubted the outcome of the battle. His urgent concern, however, was for Israel's king and his son. David thus replied, "How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?"

The young man answered with a remarkable tale. He had happened to be on Mount Gilboa where the battle was raging. There was Saul, with the enemy horsemen and chariots bearing down. "He saw me, and called to me. And I answered, 'Here I am.' And he said to me, 'Who are you?' I answered him, 'I am an Amalekite'" (2 Sam. 1:7-8). Continuing his story, the visitor said that Saul called him to "Stand beside me and kill me," so that he would not be captured alive. He concluded his report, saying "So I stood beside him and killed him, because I was sure that he could not live after he had fallen" (2 Sam. 1:9-10). Before David could respond, the man drew forth two objects

that at least proved his news that Saul was dead. He concluded “And I took the crown that was on his head and the armlet that was on his arm, and I have brought them here to my lord” (2 Sam. 1:10).

When the translators of Samuel made their division at this chapter, we can understand their logic, since the message of the Amalekite truly began a new phase in David’s life. The fact that David was far from the field when Saul died in battle proved David’s innocence in the matter. His reaction to news showed the sincerity of his motives towards the kingship and the nation. Moreover, 2 Samuel 1 shows David’s demeanor in a day that was dark with God’s judgment. His response presents us with valuable lessons about the judgment of God that we also must face.

GOD’S JUDGMENT CALLS FOR GRIEF AND REPENTANCE

This opening chapter of 2 Samuel tells us at least four things about God’s judgment. The first is that God’s judgment is always a call for grief and repentance. Undoubtedly, the Amalekite visitor expected David to respond to news of Saul’s death with a joy that would rebound upon the messenger. Instead, David’s reaction to news of Saul’s death was to launch himself into public mourning: “Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son” (2 Sam. 1:11).

We can see why the messenger may have expected David to rejoice at Saul’s death. David had, after all, spent the last several years as a fugitive from Saul’s unjust persecution. Moreover, everything that David’s heart might have desired, including a return to his home and people and the fulfillment of God’s great promises to him, depended on the removal of King Saul. So we, too, can easily imagine a chorus of “Hurrays” to break forth at the news of Saul’s demise and a special feast ordered to celebrate the end of the wicked regime. Instead of putting on a festal coat, however, David tore his clothing, with all his men following suit. Then, instead of ordering a feast, David declared a fast that continued until that evening.

There are two reasons why David acted in this strange but godly way. The first is that he knew that God is displeased by a heart that is

vengeful, even against one's own enemies. David knew the spiritual principle before his son Solomon wrote it as a proverb: "he who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished" (Prov. 17:5). One reason why God's people are not to rejoice at judgment – even the judgment of so flagrant a rebel as King Saul – is that it inevitably involves us in an offensive self-righteousness. Only God is competent to dispense judgment, because only God is perfectly holy. John Calvin points out: "he does not want us to be so presumptuous in our rejoicing that we fail to consider our own sins, and thus displease him... We ought also to tremble before his majesty, knowing that we, too, are as deserving of punishment and grief as those whom he punishes."³ This is why Paul wrote: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (Rom. 12:9).

A second reason for David's grief at news of Saul's death is that he had obviously been nurturing sanctified and merciful thoughts towards Saul in the quiet of his heart. Our reaction to sudden news will reliably show what has been cherished in our heart, and so it seems on this occasion. Had David been thinking that here was an opportunity to be rid of his nemesis, secretly hoping for news of Saul's demise, it is inconceivable for him to have reacted as he did. David Payne comments: "A lesser man than David would have gloated over the death of Saul, so long his bitter enemy; and a more ambitious man than David would have been equally pleased about the death of Jonathan, since he would naturally have succeeded his father had he lived."⁴ David's reaction to the news of Saul's death validates the several occasions when David had been more concerned for the sanctity of Saul's person as Israel's king than for his own safety. It is true that David had needed to take steps to protect himself and his followers from Saul's malice, but in his heart he fulfilled the New Testament teaching: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them... If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Rom. 12:14-18). If we wish to honor God and live peaceably with those around us, we like David must sanctify our

³ John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel I-13*, trans. Douglas Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 7.

⁴ David F. Payne, *I & II Samuel*, The Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1992), 157.

private thoughts and make it our privilege to forgive others as Christ has forgiven us.

David grieved not only over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, but also for the lamentable plight of his people, Israel: “they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the LORD and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword” (2 Sam. 1:12). In this way, David shows us how our hearts should be grieved by the evil experienced by Christ’s church and people. Dale Ralph Davis writes: “The condition of the people of God disturbed [David]. And the same principle should control our life in the kingdom. Do we not have an obligation to mourn over the unbelief, apostasy and coldness in the visible church?” How danger it is for us, he warns, to take up a “conservative haughtiness” against liberalism and an “evangelical arrogance” that contradicts the spirit of the gospel. “Rather such unbelief or error in the church should drive us to mourning and grief and prayer and sorrow. It calls for intercession more than for pronouncements.”⁵ This is the example David set with his grief and his fasting over Israel’s fall in battle.

This chapter presents the second time in the book of Samuel news has arrived to Israel’s spiritual leader bearing news of disaster and divine judgment on God’s people. The first was the calamity of the battle of Ebenezer, at the news of which Eli the high priest fell off his seat, broke his neck and died (1 Sam. 4:18). The fact that David was personally unscathed by the news is a reflection of his humility of his right standing with God. Moreover, his genuine loyalty towards his people overrode any sense of personal opportunism and his compassion for those he would lead revealed his fitness to serve as their shepherd.

Like Adoniram Judson’s troubled spirit during the night that the sounds of death came into his room, we should all be heavy in heart at every instance of divine judgment and the curse of death that lies on our fallen race, knowing that all men and women, even those who have sinned against us, are our friends and brethren. Jesus told of our approach to calamity on an occasion when a tower had fallen in

⁵ Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1999), 17.

Jerusalem killing eighteen people. Should his listeners shrug this tragedy off, assuming that those who died deserved their fate? Jesus told us to think differently: “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Lk. 13:4-5). Thoughts of divine judgment should prompt us to ensure that we are seeking mercy for everyone we know – even our enemies – and that we have repented of our own sins in order that we might cast ourselves on God’s mercy for salvation.

GOD’S JUDGMENT IS CERTAIN AND SEVERE

Not only do we learn from David’s reaction to Saul’s death, but we also gain insight into God’s judgment from the reported circumstances of Saul’s death. Saul’s experience shows that God’s judgment is certain and severe.

It is surely not coincidental, for instance, that news of Saul’s death was brought to David by an Amalekite. After all, it was for Saul’s failure to obey the command to eradicate this cursed people that God swore to tear the kingdom of Israel from his hands (1 Sam. 15:17-29). If this messenger’s story of giving Saul his killing blow was true, then Saul’s death was caused by the hand of one whose very existence was the result of Saul’s disobedience. The man who would not give the order to kill the Amalekites instead was forced to give an Amalekite an order to kill him. Even if the messenger’s claim to have given Saul his coup de gras was false, as seems likely, the fact that Saul’s royal insignia were scooped up by a member of one the most divinely cursed races of the ancient world can only be seen as an expression of God’s ultimate justice against Saul’s disobedience. Calvin writes: “This... was a just punishment which God sent Saul in accordance with his sin... After Saul’s death, God sent a man of this very nation, who snatched the crown and royal ornaments from his body, so that he was left in even greater ignominy.”⁶

Saul’s death shows that the consequences of our sins are far-reaching and that, unless we can be forgiven, God’s long-threatened judgment is certain finally to come. However Saul really died – whether he fell on his sword and died (as 1 Samuel 31:4 tells it) or having survived

⁶ Calvin, *Sermons of 2 Samuel*, 11-12.

this attempt had to be put down with his own spear by a passing Amalekite – it is certain that he perished in a shameful manner, amidst the utter ruin of his kingdom, and in circumstances of utter disgrace in the face of his enemies.

According to the New Testament, judgment is just as certain for secret as well as for public sins. Jesus taught, “Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known” (Lk. 12:2). Paul added that on the day of judgment, God will judge “the secrets of men” (Rom. 2:16). The wise course of action is therefore to seek a way of forgiveness and a hope for our justification before God. It is just this hope that the Bible reveals in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Romans 3:24 says that we may be “justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Paul adds that “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of [God’s] grace” (Eph. 1:7).

This is the gospel in which Adoniram Judson finally found peace after he was forced to face both death and judgment through the demise of his friend, Jacob Eames. Moved by the experience to reconsider his own need of salvation, Judson changed the direction of his life and entered a course of studies that resulted in the renewing of his faith in Jesus Christ. It was the urgent reality of divine judgment in death that shook Judson out of his spiritual slumber. It is because of this same judgment that the Bible urges us to turn to Christ for our forgiveness. The Bible asks: “how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” (Heb. 2:3). The question of Acts 16:30-31 is thus seen to be the greatest question of all: “what must I do to be saved?” The Bible answers: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

GOD’S JUDGMENT IS IMPOSED AS DEATH

If we lack a sense of urgency regarding our need for God’s mercy and forgiving grace, David’s treatment of the Amalekite messenger reminds us that God’s appointed punishment for sin is nothing less than death.

After grieving for Saul and commanding his people to fast, David turned back to the messenger. “Where do you come from?” he asked.

The youth answered, 'I am the son of a sojourner, an Amalekite.' David said to him, 'How is it you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?' Then David called one of the young men and said, 'Go, execute him.' And he struck him down so that he died" (2 Sam. 1:13-16).

To understand David's response, we need to examine what really seems to have happened. Numerous scholars point out that there is a contradiction between the Bible's account of Saul's death in 1 Samuel 31:4-6 and this report brought to David in 2 Samuel 1. For this, Ralph Davis provides a simple interpretive rule: "If you ever have a choice between the narrator and an Amalekite, always believe the narrator."⁷ Indeed, given the earlier description of Saul's death by falling on his own sword, it seems most likely that this Amalekite came upon Saul after he had already died, and then seized upon the opportunity to ingratiate himself with Saul's rival by taking the royal emblems to David. If this is so, he miscalculated badly, and even if he was innocent of slaying Saul, his sin of lying received the punishment of death. As David saw it, knowing only what the Amalekite had told him, the charge against the man was that of sacrilege: as God's anointed king, the person of Saul was sacrosanct so that anyone who struck him was liable to the punishment of death. David himself had so feared God that he would not strike out to harm one who had been anointed by the Lord, even at risk of danger to himself. "How is it you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy the LORD's anointed?" he asked, sealing the Amalekite messenger's doom.

This reminds us to treat as sacred all those things set apart by God for holy service. We should honor the Word of God and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is also right that we should set apart sacred space for our gathered worship, so long as we do not wrongly associate worship with a mere location or setting. The New Testament tells us to honor those set apart for spiritual leadership and those who labor in teaching the Word of God (1 Tim. 5:17). Children should honor their father and mother as holy persons set apart by God for their governance (Eph. 6:1-3). Indeed, a proper understanding of

⁷ Davis, *2 Samuel*, 14.

the fifth commandment obliges us to honor all those whom God has placed in proper authority over us. This includes civil leaders, even those who are incompetent and ungodly. Paul emphasized this, writing: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1).

If we think David’s death sentence upon the Amalekite was excessive or harsh, we fail to realize how holy is the anointed king of God’s people. Moreover, we forget that in God’s judgment “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). This does not mean that civil governments should punish all transgressions with death or other severe punishments. But as the one truly anointed to rule over God’s kingdom, David acted as judge on God’s behalf, and he reminds us that in the day of judgment to come, Jesus, the King of Kings and final Judge of all people, will consign his enemies “away into eternal punishment” in hell and then will receive his faithful people into the righteous blessing of eternal life (Mt. 25:46).

GOD’S JUDGMENT DEMANDS A ROYAL PROTECTOR

Finally, we can see why this scene of divine judgment is brought to the feet of David. David was the only one who seems to have known how to respond to God’s judgment and, temporally speaking, only he now can save his people in their distress. The Amalekite messenger, therefore, came to the right person, though with the wrong motives. Seeing David in this passage we are reminded that God’s judgment demands a royal protector.

David shows his fitness to rule Israel through his compassion for the scattered people of God. He grieved “for the people of the LORD and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword” (2 Sam. 1:12). This is a mark of true spiritual leadership and the kind of royal savior that God’s people need. In this, David points us forward to the true saving king for God’s people, Jesus Christ. Mark notes how Jesus looked upon the great crowds and “had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mk. 6:34). Jesus therefore spent the years of his earthly ministry healing, guiding, teaching, and saving, all because of his great compassion for the plight of God’s people under the yoke of sin.

It is a wonderful thing for a savior to have compassion, but he must also have strength with which actually to save those in need. In the chapters that follow the calamity of Israel's defeat, David is revealed as a mighty redeemer, pointing us forward to the true and great Redeemer, David's descendant Jesus. As the news of Saul's death, and the emblems of Saul's kingdom were laid at David's feet, God was providing a king to stand against Israel's foes. This power to redeem is fulfilled in Jesus, who showed his power over sin, evil, sickness, and death in the years of his ministry. Jesus is the gainer of forgiveness through the victory of his cross and the giver of eternal life through the conquest of his resurrection from death. It is no wonder, then, that God arranged that even in his death, Jesus should be hailed as "the King of the Jews," as was pronounced on the placard over his cross (Jn. 19:19). He is the saving king before whom we may kneel with our fears of judgment and death, acclaiming all lordship and honor to him who alone can save us from God's judgment on our sins.

Soon after these events, David would go up to be hailed as king before God's people (see 2 Sam. 2:1-4). Today, Jesus is proclaimed as Savior and king through the witness of those he has already delivered from God's judgment on sin. God's judgment calls for a royal Savior, and it is the calling of Christ's people to herald his saving reign to all the world. Paul explained: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God... Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 5:19-6:2).